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## VERSE AND PROSE.

### I.

#### THE TERMS POETRY AND PROSE.

THE vague general distinction most commonly implied by the terms 'poetry' and 'prose,' when all common factors have been cleared away, turns out to be based on a small and very unimportant difference in the things denoted. Poetry, we are told, must have emotion and imagination. But prose writings often have both of these; so neither can serve as the differentia. Nor can rhythm, simply as such, constitute the differentia, for brief rhythmic passages may be found in almost any piece of prose; while in prose of that higher, more imaginative, and more impassioned kind to which nearly every one accords the name of 'poetic prose' there is always rhythm. For instance, in De Quincey's *Dream Fugue*—to go no further—the grandeur and harmony of the ever-present rhythm is such as to entitle the piece indeed to be called a 'fugue'; but just because this rhythm is varied and indeterminate, those who hold out for the distinction would exclude the *Dream Fugue* from the class of 'poetry.' In that class of imaginative and impassioned utterance to which they restrict the name, the rhythm is determinate—methodized into regularity by the application of measuring-rods—short ones called feet, and longer ones, made up of feet, and called lines or verses. We are forced, then, to the conclusion that the reasons for the distinctive characteristics claimed for 'poetry,' as contrasted with the highest kind of prose, must be sought in the single element of verse or regulated rhythm.

'Wait!' I think I hear some one say; 'You are leaving out

of account alliteration, assonance in all its subtle shades, and all kinds of inversion and verbal arrangements common in poetry, but uncommon in prose.'

Assonance and alliteration are not peculiar to compositions in verse; they are natural to the human race, and some prose writers find it much harder to avoid than to practice the use of them. It is true, however, that the extensive employment of them in prose is liable to be regarded as a somewhat meretricious device. But it is also true that they do play an important part in much of our finest impassioned prose; and this fact merely proves that the use of them in prose, like the use of any other element of expression, is subject to the principles of good style. The extent to which they can be employed in any given case must be determined by their effectiveness for the purpose in hand: if they are effective, they are good; if not, they are bad. And what greater freedom in the use of them has the versifier? The fact is, we see them used far more profusely in verse than in prose, and we only too often uncritically accept this as a matter of course, without stopping to ask if there is a valid excuse for it. But, in the long run, it is true that the verse-writer, like the prose-writer, uses assonance and alliteration at his peril; if he uses them crudely, as many unskilful versifiers do, he loses more than he gains; we regard his use of them as a proof, not that he breathes in a loftier element of passion than ours, but rather that he is a superficial or insincere thinker and a bungling melodist.

Similar reasoning applies to the use of inversions and other unusual orders of words. Such orders are really more common in verse than in prose. But they are not an end in themselves; they are a means; and the legitimacy of any given instance depends solely upon its effectiveness as judged by good stylistic taste. So, too, as regards their use in prose. When the muse of rhythmic prose unfurls her wings, when she really frees herself and enters the realm of fine art, she knows no limits in

this matter except those imposed by good stylistic taste. 'Convention!' some one says. Very true; the Muse of prose does only too often think of convention; but when she is really free, she owes fealty to artistic taste alone, and uses any inversion or assonance or alliteration that her critical judgment approves as effective for the case in hand.

Thus, after all, verse remains the sole difference, or cause of difference, between the norms of poetry and prose, popularly so-called. What, then, are we to do with the contrasted terms, 'poetry' and 'prose'?

By the uncritical, these terms are commonly paired off in three distinct ways. First, they are used as names for contrasted essences, without reference to forms of expression. As regards this use, it is only necessary to point out that prose is not an essence, but a medium; and hence, in this case, the true antithesis is *Poetry vs. Non-Poetry*.

Secondly, the terms 'poetry' and 'prose' are used as names for contrasted modes, or media, of expression. Here it must be said that poetry is a matter of essence, and not of medium; the true antithesis in this case is *Verse vs. Prose*.

Thirdly, each of these terms is used to denote an essence and a medium in combination. This use ignores the original meaning of the word poetry, which includes any work of the creative imagination expressed in words. It is based on the assumption that the inevitable garb of all experience truly poetic is verse, or, conversely, that a garb of prose implies a content generically different from that which is proper to verse. The terms in this sense are so at home now in the language that it is doubtful if any exposition of the inconsistencies involved in this use of them will ever alter their meaning for the vulgar mind. The first and second ways of using them are simply unsuccessful attempts to avoid the laxity and vagueness of the third. The result is that we have one set of names, with three sets of meanings. What we need is two sets of names, with distinct meanings, Poetry and Non-Poetry, and Verse and Prose—the antithesis of essences, and the antithesis of media.

## II.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF VERSE.

What is there in verse to render it so different from rhythmic prose that to many minds, in spite of the identical range of the two media as regards subjects, it seems to constitute a distinct genus, and to be entitled to reserve to itself the name of Poetry? Is the prestige of verse based upon some intrinsic superiority as a medium, or is it mainly adventitious and conventional?

Before we enter upon this consideration, it is necessary to determine what should be taken as the norm of verse. This norm I find in unrimed iambic pentameter, or blank verse. Blank verse contains in its simplest form that which our investigation has forced us to admit as the sole possible source of the differences supposed to exist between the genera of poetry and prose, namely regulated rhythm. To fix upon the classical hexameter as the norm would not alter the argument in the least: whatever difference there might be between its powers and those of blank verse could only be one of degree. And so, too, of any possible kind of unrimed verse. Rime is not essential to the distinction. It is a mere auxiliary of verse, a device for intensifying somewhat the effect of normal verse. In one aspect, also, it is but a form of assonance, and as such no longer germane to our study—unless, indeed, some one wishes to say that unrimed verse is not poetry at all, in which case rime itself would at once become the sole differentia.

Three reasons may be pointed out why verse might be capable of peculiar and higher effects than those possible to prose. It may be said: (1) The mere division of the composition into lines serves as a kind of external setting, which appeals to the eye and enhances the beauty of the content, as the setting enhances the beauty of the precious stone; (2) The division into lines, both through the eye and the ear, apprises the normal reader that he has to do with fine art; it challenges a becoming and peculiar attention, with the result of truer sympathy; (3)

The music or melody which results from the regulated rhythm, because it is simpler, in the sense that it is more formal than that of prose, is more noticeable and more grateful to the normal musical sense. If verse can transfigure thought, can intensify its beauty and its appeal, then it must do so through some one or more of these three factors, for these are the only ways in which the external form of verse differs from that of imaginative and impassioned prose. Let us consider them in the order in which I have defined them.

1. Does the divisions into lines heighten the beauty of the content by acting as a setting which appeals to the eye? Doubtless to some readers it does, but in proportion as the reader is critical—in proportion as he has learned to value poetry for what is essential in it—he regards the lines as a mere convention, or, at best, of value only in so far as they group or define thought and concentrate attention. For this reason alone, end-stopped lines have a certain advantage over run-on lines; but this advantage is more than counterbalanced by the superior continuity of thought in verse made up of run-on lines; and hence verse of this kind is the more satisfactory to the reader of trained taste. Acrostic verse presents an extreme case of the same kind of visual appeal which is made by the single line or pair of lines, but no one would hold that the external shape of an acrostic poem had anything to do with its real significance.

2. Does the division into lines fasten the eye and challenge the ear of the reader, and invite him to a more sympathetic attention than prose? Undoubtedly it does—granting that the reader is not one of that considerable class who shun verse. But this, again, as in the first case, is putting verse on the basis of a mere external device: it is a tacit admission that verse, as such, has no influence on the intrinsic value of the stuff it embodies. Such devices count for less and less as the reader rises in the scale of culture. Moreover, the appeal to the eye is absent in the case of a blind person, and the appeal to the outer ear in the case of a deaf person; yet both the blind

and the deaf enjoy verse. Again, the division into lines is in itself a source of monotony. The constantly recurring check which the flow of mental energy receives at the ends of the lines, slight though it may seem at first, soon wearies and dulls the attention. This is one reason why most persons prefer to read verse in brief sittings.

3. Does the regulated rhythm of verse afford a peculiar satisfaction to the musical sense? Again, undoubtedly, yes. But at once we must qualify, for if the regularity of the verse be strict, it soon ceases to please the musical sense, loses its hold upon the attention, and with this loses its magic. Knowing this, the skilful versifier has many shifts to secure variety. But each shift is more or less an approach towards the greater freedom and indeterminateness of prose rhythm.

It would seem, then, that verse as such has no intrinsic power to deepen and enhance thought, or, as some say, to transfigure thought; and if the thought we find in verse does sometimes really seem to have undergone some magic, we must look for the transfiguring agency, not in the fact of a regulated rhythm, but in elements of style which belong to verse no more peculiarly than to rhythmic prose, and the principles of effectiveness in the use of which are probably the same in the one form as in the other.

But are the principles of style the same for verse as for prose? In the nature of things they should be essentially the same, though custom and convention have made differences. These differences in style have arisen through the differences in the subject-matter of verse and of plain prose. The subject-matter being essentially different, the style must be different: this is a sound principle, an axiom, if one knows the meaning of style. But it has become more than a principle—it has become a convention—a rule, and as such, has lost its freedom. It is a mistake to apply conventions and restrictions of style based upon the difference between ordinary prose and poetry to the higher forms of prose—to imaginative and impassioned prose, which is essentially poetry, and should have all the

freedom of poetry. If critics had applied to the case, not a set of conventions, but the principle, or axiom, stated above—if they had said: Let each subject regulate its own style according to its essential mood and quality, let the style as a whole, and in each and every detail, be appraised by its effectiveness for the purpose in hand, then all would have been well; we should have no talk about the style appropriate in verse and the style appropriate in prose; subject, mood, and the untrammelled artistic taste of the writer would determine the whole matter. Then, in general, what was bad style in imaginative prose would be regarded as bad style in verse, though now, on account of custom and familiarity, we pass over things without notice when we are reading verse which we should look at askance if we met them in prose. Nevertheless, in many such a case a careful study would show us, blunted though our sensibilities are by custom, that the word, phrase, trope, order, construction, assonance, or alliteration which we admitted in verse, but shied at in prose, was neither better nor worse in the one setting than in the other. It is by no means true that all which the exigencies of verse permit is effective; nor is verse which is technically good necessarily good poetry. To repeat, in general what is bad in verse is likely to be bad in imaginative prose, what is bad in imaginative prose is likely to be bad in verse; and the reason is that the subject-matters of these two kinds of composition both belong in the realm of artistic material.

But can verse do nothing which prose cannot also do? Yes, but not necessarily finer or higher things. Effects can be produced in verse not possible in prose, though with the same general substance prose might get as high or higher effects. Prose can do things not possible in verse, though with the same general substance verse might get equally noble results, though necessarily somewhat different results. The only reason why they can thus do each what the other cannot, is because the rhythm of the one is regular, of the other irregular; were it not for this difference they would have equal, or rather



identical, freedom, and hence the same possibilities. Anapæstic verse has a different movement from plain iambic, and can do things not possible to iambic verse—not necessarily higher things, but different things. Music of one kind of movement can get effects not possible to music of any other movement. And so, too, of prose and verse in general, as related to each other.

But once more the champion of verse returns: ‘If verse has no inherent advantage over prose,’ he asks, ‘how do you account for the fact that there are hundreds of compositions in verse which give pleasure of a purity and intensity not equaled by anything ever written in prose?’

I simply deny the fact: I do not believe there are hundreds of compositions in verse which surpass either in substance or style all that has ever been written in prose. Nay, name a single verse-composition, and I think competent critics might be found who get an intenser pleasure from some passage or whole composition in prose. This would, I think, certainly be true if we limited the contest to substance; but I should consider the chances good for my side even if we restricted the contest to beauty of rhythm, though it is hardly warrantable thus to separate beauty of substance and beauty of rhythm, since the latter certainly can have no particular value distinct from its proper function of interpreting and embellishing thought and emotion. Shelley, we remember, in his *Defense of Poesy* said of Plato, ‘the truth and splendor of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive.’ For these reasons he reckoned Plato ‘essentially a poet’; and Shelley certainly was a good judge of ‘truth and splendor of imagery,’ and of ‘melody of language.’

‘But, after all,’ says the objector, ‘isn’t it a fact that, of the whole number of compositions which afford delight by beauty of expression as well as by intrinsic qualities of substance, by far the greater part are in verse? And, if so, doesn’t it prove that verse is better adapted than prose for the expression of the

higher kinds of experience? Doesn't it show that, after all, verse has a kind of magic, a subtle and peculiar affinity with some fundamental fact in the constitution of the human soul, and that, as Wordsworth thought, in itself, without other embellishment, it can confer grace and dignity upon thought?'

Indeed, I do think it very probable that the number of masterpieces of style in verse is far greater than in prose, though I should by no means grant that, say, the hundred noblest things ever written are all in verse, or even the one very noblest thing. And I grant, also, that verse, or metre, has an affinity with something in the constitution of man—something in the constitution of the universe, namely the tendency to rhythmic action. But emotional prose has an even subtler affinity with rhythm. It is not true that metre of itself, without other embellishment, always confers grace and dignity upon thought. It very frequently does just the opposite—divests thought of its native grace and dignity. In any case, to put the matter as though it were merely one of metre is not to explain, but to befog the question. All depends upon what the thought is, and who is versifying it. When the metre is suited to the thought, it certainly helps; otherwise not. In one case the thought—including in the thought its accompanying emotional atmosphere, or mood, without which, properly speaking, it would not be the same thought—is best suited to one metre, in another case, to another metre; in still another case it cannot be molded to any regular rhythm without losing something of its integrity and charm. In other words, the thought itself, the thing to be expressed, is what should determine the expression, both in word and movement. If you fit that thought to a regular rhythm, you may embellish it, or you may cramp it till all its beauty is gone; in either case, as the word 'fit' implies, the natural rhythm of the thought is modified to suit a preconceived or conventional movement or rhythm, and in so far it is no longer the same thought. Nearly all versification is to some extent a process of fitting thought to a form of expression, instead of fitting

the expression in every detail to the thought. In so far, it is a reversal of the natural or true causal order of the process of composition. The number of lines of verse in English literature which seem inevitably to have dictated their expression—words, metre, and all—is relatively very small. In most verse we not only feel that the thought has been rouged and powdered, but that it has been laced into a shape which can seem natural and agreeable only to a highly conventionalized taste. In every case where the metre seems of itself to add grace and dignity to the thought, it does so not by molding the thought to its own movement, but because it accords with the best nature of the thought. What Coleridge says on the subject of rime applies equally well to metre in general: ‘Nothing can permanently please which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise.’ In short, the secret of the relation of metre to thought is essentially the secret of all style—namely, that expression is best which most directly flows from and mirrors thought. In one case this expression will have a regular or measured rhythm, in another case an unmeasured rhythm.

I am aware, however, that I have not yet explicitly accounted for the fact that our literature contains more really beautiful pieces of art in verse than in prose. I hinted at one aspect of the reason of this when I spoke of the greater freedom allowed the writer of verse as compared with the writer of prose, especially in such things as diction, order of words, assonance, alliteration, etc. Precisely how verse originated will probably never be settled, but no doubt it is a sufficient general explanation to say that it arose in connection with music as an outcome of the native impulse of man to rhythmic expression of whatever kind. Rhythm was the origin of it, as it is still the essence of it. Moreover, as primitive music was very simple and regular in movement, the rhythm of the verbal compositions connected with it had also to be simple and regular. Thus verse, as distinguished from the indeterminate rhythm of impassioned prose, probably arose almost as soon as the

uniting of words and melody began to be practised in music. With such an origin, it is easy to see how, from the first, verse would be regarded as peculiarly an artistic medium, in distinction to the less formal and less tractable rhythm of prose. To compose in prose would debar one from the realm of art, to compose in verse would be to challenge the attention due to art, and receive the praise due to art. Hence whoever felt that he had a message of peculiar importance would naturally express himself in verse.

Again, along with the convention thus established to withhold the name of art, or what would amount to the same thing, the attitude of artistic appreciation, from all verbal compositions not in verse, arose the convention to leave the artist untrammelled by any special rules except the mechanics of verse; with this exception, he should be free as air. This freedom, even though verse were not prescribed as the proper medium of artistic expression, would in itself serve as a powerful incentive to imaginative minds to make verse their mode of utterance. Again, though verse arose as a means of facilitating rhythmic utterance, in time this fact was forgotten, and verse came to be regarded as a more difficult, and hence a higher, medium than prose; and in proportion as this was so, to compose successfully in verse was regarded as a feat worthy of special praise, and artistic pride and emulation were correspondingly stimulated.

In convention, then, we have an agency which, of itself, without any assumption of an inherent superiority in verse, can account for the fact that the number of masterpieces in verse is relatively greater than in prose. Convention, however it arose, restricted art in language to compositions in verse, and denied the name and praise of art to all forms of prose; and convention, unreasonably enough, allowed the writer in verse a degree of freedom in fancy, as well as in all the formal devices of style, which it withheld from the writer in prose. The result has been that, with occasional sporadic exceptions, until within the last two centuries, possibly until within the last century, all conscious aspirants for a place in the temple of literary art

have written verse. Not only have a vast number of attempts been made, but in most cases, because these attempts were made with a deliberate artistic intention, great care was expended upon them. Thus, though the bulk of prose-writings greatly exceeds the bulk of verse-writings, probably the amount of time and energy spent in versifying since the art of verse was invented has greatly exceeded that spent in writing prose. And this is probably the true explanation of the fact that the number of compositions in verse which have reached a high point of condensation, finish, and general artistic excellence is so much larger than in prose. In short, it is all a matter of frequency and intensity of effort with conscious artistic purpose. And this, in turn, is due to the patronage of a persistent convention which was of adventitious rather than rational origin.

### III.

#### PROSE AS A MEDIUM.

The conclusions just reached may have an unpleasant sound, and yet a still more positive heresy might be maintained. Not only can the fact that there are more masterpieces in verse than in prose be explained without assuming that verse is the better medium, but there is reason to believe that prose, on the contrary, is a medium of altogether nobler possibilities. The main grounds for such a belief are as follows.

As indicated in the foregoing section, among the things that have operated to give verse its prestige as a medium of artistic expression, one of the most important is the fact that the naive and superficially cultivated ear is most readily pleased with regular and easily discernible rhythms. A second reason is the popular belief that verse is very much harder to master than prose. The artificial always seems hard to the uninitiated. And this belief that verse is hard reacts upon, and helps to sustain, its reputation as a nobler medium than prose. Out of such beliefs came much of the support which so long kept

supreme the convention that whoever aspires to be called an artist in language must write in verse. But, after all, there are no good reasons for believing that verse is harder to produce than prose. Indeed there is one excellent reason for believing just the opposite: verse of a fair degree of harmony should be easier to produce than prose of a similar degree of harmony, just because of its technical requirements. In writing, as in everything else, rules are in a sense helpful: though they hamper, they keep one within the limits of safety; they preclude doubts; they save time and energy. Verse becomes hard only when the writer aims at high artistic effects; and then the difficulty of his task is due far more to the stubbornness of his subject or thought than to the nature of verse. The artist's chief problem is essentially the same in verse and in prose: in each it is the shaping of his subject, and the transfiguring of it by the revelation of its inward light, that gives him trouble. Consider the large number of long poems of high finish in our language. The *Faerie Queene*, for instance, has over thirty thousand lines, and all in rime to boot. We think of that as an almost incredible feat, yet Spenser accomplished it in the leisure of a very few years. Does any one suppose it cost Spenser a greater effort to express himself thus in verse than it did Thackeray to get the style to suit him in *Henry Esmond*?

But verse has the weakness, as well as the strength, of its limitations. Regular rhythm is easy to produce, and it is striking and readily enjoyed; that is its strength; but it also soon becomes monotonous and defeats its own end. Hence poets of fine ear, sometimes deliberately, sometimes instinctively, vary the rhythm; and each variation, in so far as it is a variation at all, is a departure from the strict norm of verse, and an approach towards the rhythm of prose. At the best, composition in verse is to some extent a process of fitting and cramping thought and thought-rhythms to suit an outward musical shape or mold, and not, as it should be, a process of summoning thought to unfold in its proper form, and dictate its own musical garb.

In a certain sense, then, verse is an impostor. It is formally easy, and yet it has the reputation of being nobly difficult, and enjoys a corresponding license. It is supposed to transfigure thought, and yet it more often cramps and conventionalizes thought, and robs it of its natural bloom. It is supposed to produce a sweeter music than prose, and yet only by deviating from its own norm in the direction of prose can it avoid eventual monotony.

On the other hand, the chief advantages of prose over verse are summed up in saying that it has greater musical freedom than verse. The one thing it must not do is to encroach upon the field of verse-rhythms; to do that is to cease to be prose, and become verse. But the whole realm of indeterminate rhythms is its possession. What and how many these are no one knows; if we could describe or count them, they would no longer be indeterminate. All we mean by 'indeterminate' is 'unknown.' And yet if we could describe and name them all, they would be found to be far more complex than verse-rhythms. For this reason, if for no other, they are hard to describe, hard to imitate, and not so liable to monotony as verse-rhythms.

Every prose writer, in his moments of original feeling, tends to express himself in rhythm peculiar to himself. This is one of the main secrets of style. Style is to a considerable extent a matter of what we might call personal rhythm. This is why it is so inimitable. This is why an assumed style does not please; it does not become the wearer. But not only has every possessor of style his own peculiar rhythm; it is probable also that every genuine mood of sensitive writers, every distinct emotion, imparts its own becoming rhythm to the expression. Such a writer does not write constantly in one rhythm. He is free; he suits his music to his feeling, and his feeling varies with his thought.

Undoubtedly the same thing is true to some extent in verse. The music of a great verse-writer is forever different from that of all other writers. Who can imitate Milton's blank verse, or

Shakespeare's? Nevertheless, it is obvious that much of the variety and genuineness and peculiar fitness and expressiveness of music possible to prose in the hands of a writer of subtle and original power, is, by virtue of its primary convention, beyond the range of verse. To write in prose is to have the amplest scope, the most perfect freedom, for the natural rhythm of the soul in thought and emotion. Hence the music of fine prose is often so subtle that the untrained ear never notices it. For the same reason it is sometimes so complex that the untrained ear is entirely unequal to its appreciation, though conscious of some unusual effect. Simple and regular music is surest of its audience, but this proves only that popular taste is not up to the noble harmony of more complex compositions. Good workmen, we are told, do not quarrel with their tools; and yet to work patiently with a mediocre tool when one has to do so, and to be satisfied with it, are not the same. Probably no great poet ever found verse an entirely adequate medium. Probably the more completely verse answers for the expression of a writer's whole message, the more restricted in range and depth of thought and feeling is that author.

Prose is a freer and more natural medium than verse, but for this very reason it is also a more difficult medium, as well as a nobler medium. In its freedom lies its peculiar strength for some writers, and its weakness for others. Nothing is so hard as to be free and natural. Only great souls are fit for freedom. We say they make their own laws; rather, they discover laws and paths of safety where others cannot see them, and hence dare not venture. Freedom is both hard and noble; each partly because of the other. The violin is a harder instrument to master than the piano, because it is a less mechanical, a freer instrument; but once it is mastered, its possibilities are nobler than those of the piano. Its voice is more varied, more natural, and more vital than that of the piano; it answers more subtly to the master's feeling. Hence I call it a nobler instrument than the piano; it is freer, more difficult, and richer. And so



of prose. It is a freer, richer medium than verse. It is also a harder medium: it takes nobler powers to sound its depths. This is one reason why we have so few masters of prose; but a stronger reason, as said before, is the conventional prestige of verse.

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